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ABSTRACT

A national oral history project is needed to preserve the information and wisdom of the generation of reading teachers, teacher trainers, and researchers who are near retirement and provide the last direct ties with the field's pioneers. The proposed project focuses on developing an understanding of: (1) the impact of educational events and important personalities through the capturing of vital incidents; (2) teaching/literacy profession as a whole and also the various hierarchical status groups of the past; and (3) current academic generations. Fundamental activities to be undertaken during the "prestudy" phase focus upon the identification of both the individuals who are to undertake the oral histories and also those individuals who will be interviewed. Existing professional associations and selected institutions of higher education will need to cooperate for the project to be successful. The training program for project participants should employ a form of the trainer of trainers model, similar to the model used in the Reading Recovery program. Immediate dissemination activities would include journal articles and conference presentations. Long-term dissemination activities would come about as scholars had the opportunity to study and write about the materials collected by participants. The collection of materials generated by the project should be carefully preserved. (Contains 20 general references and 38 references for oral history projects in literacy.) (RS)

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# The Roots of Reading: Preserving the Heritage of a Profession Through Oral History Projects

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**Running Head: Roots of Reading**

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**Abstract**

**The Roots of Reading: Preserving the Heritage of a Profession Through Oral History Projects**

The modern field of reading pedagogy has been shaped by generations of teachers, teacher trainers, and researchers who have worked throughout the past one hundred years to answer fundamental questions about the literacy-learning process and to bring literacy to the children and adults across the nation. The earliest generations have long since passed away. Another generation--that which provides our last direct ties with the field's pioneers--is entering the retirement stage of their careers. Those who have been among the "elite" will leave a written legacy in their publications. However, the vast majority of the professionals in this generation is unlikely to leave a recorded legacy even though these individuals hold a wealth of information of interest to future generations of reading professionals. The authors propose that this wisdom should be saved through the undertaking of a national oral history project. The article details the construct of such a project.

**The Roots of Reading: Preserving the Heritage of a Profession Through Oral History Projects**

Literacy has been a fundamental component of pedagogy across the ages. In fact, one could make the case that literate competence has often constituted the pedagogy. One can also argue that the study of literacy, regardless of the methodology, has influenced greatly the direction of all facets of pedagogy and andragogy. Furthermore, since the turn of the century, cognitive psychologists, educational psychologists, and educational researchers have used literacy to test hypotheses about more general learning processes, as well as to speculate about the education of young and old alike. Literacy researchers such as Gray, Gates, Dodge, Davis, and Tinker, among others provided the education field with a rich foundation upon which to build for the future. Indeed whether they be deceased, retired or active, the leaders of the field, or those called the "elite," (McMahon, 1989) have had the opportunity to gain a form of immortality through the pen.

Unfortunately, there still exists the very real danger that much of the expert wisdom of the past may be lost. In addition, there are also other less visible members of our profession who hold unique and valuable knowledge that could be forgotten. This includes the wisdom of classroom teachers and reading specialists who worked with the children, the college developmental readers, and the adult non-readers. As a rule this is a group of professionals that are less likely to pass on their knowledge or their recollections in any organized or enduring form such as manuscripts, journals, letters, or other

documentary records. Their wisdom and their experiences have not been preserved for the use of future generations of literacy educators and researchers. Yet, many of these individuals would be willing to share classroom memories, anecdotes, or concerns with an interested colleague.

At this time it is appropriate to acknowledge, for both the recognized and the unrecognized senior educators, the old adage that every time an elder passes, a rich library is lost to our profession. It is time to preserve the richness of the wisdom of the past for current and future professionals in the literacy field. Moreover, we propose a **national oral history** project focusing on our profession's overlooked national treasures: retired researchers, teacher trainers, and classroom teachers. We believe that our professional roots could be examined profitably through recollections of classroom reading teachers and university professors of reading pedagogy who have served the field over the last 40 years. The appropriate methodology for such an undertaking is provided through the field of oral history (Baum, 1987; Kyrig & Marty, 1982; Sitton, Mehaffy & Davis, 1983; Zimmerman, 1981).

Within this paper we propose a historical research agenda for the preservation of the professional knowledge and the unique understandings and insights developed by a generation of reading professionals who are now reaching or have reached retirement age. It is this generation that provides our last ties with the generation that forged our professional identity. At the heart of this proposed national agenda is the undertaking of oral histories of both field-based teachers and college/university professors. In the remainder of this paper, we will describe the overall organization of a

national oral history project. We also provide a set of more specific guidelines for developing a national oral history project that can be undertaken with the joint participation of the field's professional organizations and the nation's teacher training programs. As appropriate, we present descriptions of oral history methodology when related to a study of reading pedagogy.

*Oral History As A Method*

As with most specialities in the greater field of pedagogy, there is a small but dedicated cadre of individuals in reading education who seek to learn more about our professional past so as to guide and to enrich those who are more focused in the present. In doing so, historians in the field of professional literacy have attempted to use various forms of historical analysis and categorization schemes to provide a sense of order to the volumes of documentary evidence pertaining to our past endeavors (for various examples see the 40th Anniversary Issue of The Reading Teacher, 1992). A number of schemes have been used to differentiate between historical trends/eras. For instance, individuals such as Smith (1965), Leedy (1958), and more recently, Robinson, Farone, Hittleman, and Unruh (1990) developed specific criteria to form historical eras; others such as Lowe (1970) and Cook (1977) simply used each decade as a marker; still others (e.g., Moore, Readence, & Rickleman, 1983; Shannon, 1989; Stahl, & Henk, 1986) approached our history from the study of thematic topics.

All of these vantages and forms of demarcation have merit, and quite certainly, these chroniclers and historians have added greatly to our enduring knowledge of the field. Yet, such writers have tended to base their ideas

heavily on the use of documents and artifacts such as government reports, research papers, theoretical articles, classroom materials, and students' work. All too often, previous writers have tended to overlook the most fragile and irreplaceable of the forms of historical evidence -- human memory. One exception to this trend is Jerrolds' (1977) history of the International Reading Association, which is richer by his capturing memories through interviews with that organization's founders.

Hence, we believe that there is still another historical vantage which can both provide and preserve for the field a rich understanding of our past endeavors. This vantage rests in is the oral history method. Whether one calls the process oral history, life history, oral biography, or oral chronicles, the method utilized in undertaking the research and then constructing the story focuses on the desire to understand several fundamental aspects of the human experience across the generations. In the scope of the proposed project the fundamental understandings focus on developing an understanding of the (1) impact of educational events and important personalities through the capturing of vital incidents, particular details not likely to be found in print, and the general color of a period; (2) teaching/literacy profession as a whole and also as found within various hierarchical status groups during the past; and (3) current academic generations since our academic ancestors have influenced all of us.

*The Method of Oral History*

Oral history is a method of research used for collecting the ideas, the past experiences, and the unique remembered understandings from individuals through an interview process. The product of oral history

methodology- audio/video tapes, respective transcriptions, integrative reports- is also called oral history. As with any systematic research approach there are generally accepted methodologies for oral history. While complete explanation of methods is not possible in this paper, we sketch those issues that will likely guide such an oral history collaboration. Readers may find much more specific guidelines in the elaborated reference list at the end of this paper.

*Prestudy Activities*

Prestudy activities are critical to the successful undertaking of such a large scale project. Well before the interview process begins, there is a basic, yet very important stage of building the foundation for any oral history project. The first step is the formulation of a general purpose for this project by appropriate background research in reference sources. For the project described in this paper, the overall purpose focuses on the literacy professional's contributions to the field of literacy and his/her perspectives on trends in the area of literacy. To generate interview guides to use when interviewing respective participants, sources should be reviewed such as professional journals, methods texts, instructional textbooks, and curriculum materials issued during the period being covered. In addition, school records and informal recollections from members of the professional community could provide additional forms of important background information. In the case of "elite" literacy professionals, familiarization with their writing is essential. The process of interviewing and the interpretation of the interview can be enhanced through the researcher's familiarity with the informant's writing. From a verificative perspective, these documents can also function as a form of triangulation. Such a triangulation process is further supported

through the review of any interviewee's personal papers and the verification of data through recollections of his or her peers (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Dillon, 1985).

Familiarization with literacy research and curricula, and the respective historical eras these documents emerged from supports the development of an interview guide. The interview guide is basically a set of topics or broad open-ended questions which will informally guide the interview process (Patton, 1990; Sitton, Mehaffy, & Davis, 1983). While guides are not always used, we suggest that they be given some consideration so that life history narratives may share some structured similarities, and be more available for cross-case analysis at a later date.

The fundamental activities to be undertaken during this prestudy stage focus upon the identification of both the individuals who are to undertake the oral histories and also those individuals who will be interviewed. For the "elites" the selection process has in many respects already been completed. We know the identities of such leaders or we can tie into groups such as the Reading Hall of Fame. However, for the "non-elites," this is not so easy a matter as there is a need to select from a variety of informant groups so as to be representative of both hierarchic status groups (e.g., public and private school classroom teachers, reading specialists, program administrators, adult literacy teachers, college developmental reading specialists, teacher trainers, and researchers) and regionally situated groups (e.g., rural sites, urban centers, and urban collar communities from each state across the nation). Consultation with members of the local professional community and individuals associated with organizations such as

the American Association of Retired Teachers can be most helpful in identifying potential interviewees that fall within the "non-elite" category.

We suggest that potential interviewees be individuals who have information on the topic, a willingness to be interviewed, and be both physically and mentally able to participate in the interview process. The interviewees must also be fully aware of the project's intent and the kinds of information desired, as well as being comfortable with an interview process where they will do most of the talking, as the ideas are recorded on tape. Participants must also provide their consent to the publication of their oral history report, contingent on each participant's approval of the written document.

Furthermore, we recognize that there is a fundamental relationship between interviewers and interviewees (Denzin, 1989) that must be considered in making matches for oral history interviews. In fact, Blagg (1987) proposes that the interaction between interviewers and interviewees is characterized by reciprocal influency that has substantive effects on what is mutually constructed as data. From another perspective, we expect that greater cooperation between parties and greater dedication to task completion will be achieved if there is a degree of fit between the interviewer and interviewee. For instance, the appointed historians from the various national level organizations (e.g., College Reading Association, the National Reading Conference, the College Reading and Learning Association) would conduct interviews of selected influential individuals associated closely with the respective organization. These interviewees might be former officers or past award winners. Representatives from Special Interest Groups

of the International Reading Association or the American Educational Research Association, or from divisions such as those central to the College Reading Association might focus on individuals who have directly contributed to the respective group's content specialization.

State and local reading councils (I.R.A.), field councils (N.R.C.), and state affiliates (L.V.A.) might undertake interviews of individuals who have contributed more directly to the local scene. Such interviewees will no doubt be retired teachers, literacy providers, administrators, or teacher educators. Graduate students in education programs might also be invited to conduct life histories of local teachers as part of course work assignments (King, 1991). The life history or oral history project could also provide a rather exciting vehicle for reviving the thesis option at the masters level in many institutions of higher education.

For this national project to be successful there is great need for cooperation between existing associations and selected institutions of higher education. Hence, a coordinating committee representing the cooperating parties would need to be constituted before actual collection of oral history interviews could be undertaken. The membership on the committee would be composed of representatives, perhaps historians, from each of the national associations serving literacy functions and focusing on specific populations (e.g., the College Reading and Learning Association, the College Reading Association, the National Reading Conference, the American Reading Forum, the Literacy Volunteers of America, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the International Reading Association). A selected number of state level representatives could be asked to serve as well. The coordinating

functions for this committee and the state level contributors could be undertaken by the History of Reading Special Interest Group of the International Reading Association.

*Training Project Participants*

The training program for the national oral history project should employ a form of the trainer of trainers model (e.g., similar to the model used in the Reading Recovery Program). The first activity to be undertaken must focus on the development of training materials to be used throughout the formal training program. Training materials would be comprised of literature (see "References For Oral History Projects In Literacy" at the end of this paper) detailing the steps for undertaking an oral history project along with a sample set of materials (Dillon, 1985) that follow an oral history from the identification of the informant through the final draft of an oral history report. In addition, the materials in a training package would include examples of oral history projects with purpose and research questions outlined, sample interview guides, several completed oral history interviews (written and audio versions), simulation (case) activities for practice interviews, ethical guidelines for the interview, and reference lists of sources on oral history methods. The trainers would also develop videotapes of actual interviews of individuals from each of the categories of informants previously mentioned in this concept paper.

The training program would be offered to selected trainers at several national conferences during the training year. Then upon the completion of the training and the successful undertaking of an oral history project, each trainer would offer a like training program to individuals within his/her own

state. For instance, if a training program was held in May in conjunction with the Annual Convention of the International Reading Association (IRA), a cadre of individuals from each of the state IRA councils would undergo the trainers' workshop. Then over the summer months, each trainee would undertake an oral history project of an individual from the respective state. Furthermore, each participant would be assigned a mentor from the national coordinating committee who would monitor the progress of the oral history project and also provide assistance whenever necessary. The final report would be reviewed by the mentor and another member of the coordinating committee.

After the successful completion of a life history project, the trainee would begin the development of a training program that would be offered at the respective state reading conference during the upcoming year. At these state level training sessions, individuals would come forward from local IRA councils and the respective state's special interest councils. Training would proceed in much the same manner and with the same materials as at the national level training sessions, but with the addition of the state trainer's oral history project as more localized training materials. Each individual trained at this level would undertake an oral history project with an individual identified by the membership of a local reading council.

*Archival and Dissemination Activities*

The dissemination stage of the project consists of two stages: immediate dissemination activities and long term archival and dissemination functions. With the former, the reports developed by the participants would be submitted to the periodicals sponsored by the respective sponsoring

organizations. For instance, these sources could be state reading journals or special interest group journals and newsletters. Immediate dissemination could also take the form of presentations delivered at state or national conferences with possible inclusion of resultant manuscripts in the conference yearbooks. In such cases, both interviewers and interviewees might participate. All final reports would also be released by the coordinating committee to the ERIC Document Reproduction Service as technical reports.

Long term dissemination activities would come about as scholars in the field had opportunities to study and write about the materials collected by participants. For such activity to happen, we propose that a central depository of all completed reports and associated transcripts/tapes be created. Perhaps the library of the International Reading Association might best serve this function. With such a collection, scholars could analyze trends across categories of respondents. Monographs could be written from such work and any proceeds accrued could help to pay for the initial housing of the collection. Resultant manuscripts might also be drafted for submission to national level journals in literacy (e.g., The Reading Teacher, Journal of Reading, Journal of Reading Behavior, Reading Research & Instruction) and other specialized journals (e.g., the Journal of Narrative and Life History).

*Ongoing Activities*

Ongoing activities would be closely related to the promotion of long term scholarly functions mentioned in the previous section. It is imperative that any collection be carefully preserved for the use of future generations. As an example, most oral historians currently work with cassette tape

recorders because of the ease with which these can be transported and then utilized during the interview process. Furthermore, the cassette tape is rather facilitative of the transcription process. Still even with all the ease afforded by use of cassettes, the life of such a recording artifact is somewhat limited. Hence, part of the archival function would be the transference of each cassette to a compact disk format since this type of recording has a longer life than cassette tapes. Obviously, there are also functions of preserving, cataloging, and categorizing to be performed by the archivist over the years.

In summary, the value of a national oral history project is directly related to the value we as a profession place on our place in time. It is all too easy to focus myopically on "cutting edge" theory and research while also being hypothesized by our expectations of the future. Yet, such unidirectional behavior leads us to be blind to our past accomplishments and equally important failures. It is through the memories of our senior colleagues that we can learn the valuable lessons of the past. Indeed, with oral history activities there is a bridge from the wisdom of the past to the promises of the future.

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